

O CIMÉRIO

ABLAZE

2

A RAINHA DA CINZELA NEGRA

JEAN-DAVID
MORVAN
PIERRE
ALARY



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SO
SOQUARRINHOS
ARTE
HQS

O CIMÉRIO



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A RAINHA DA COSTA NEGRA



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ABLAZE APRESENTA

O CIMÉRIO A RAINHA DA COSTA NEGRA

O Conan de Robert E. Howard surgiu pela primeira vez nas páginas da Pulp Magazine na década de 1930. Ele contribuiu com 17 histórias de Conan para a *Weird Tales Magazine* de 1932 a 1936. Através dessas histórias, vemos o herói selvagem de Robert E. Howard tomar forma.

Em "*A Rainha da Costa Negra*", Conan é perseguido por matar um juiz e encontra refúgio em um navio mercante... mas logo após zarpar, o Cimério e seus novos companheiros enfrentam uma ameaça: a lendária Bêlit a auto-proclamada **Rainha da Costa Negra**! Publicado pela primeira vez na *Weird Tales Magazine* na edição de maio de 1934, este clássico de Conan é um maravilhoso ponto de início.

TRADUÇÃO & LETRAS: YUGIFAN

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ROTEIRO ADAPTADO
JEAN-DAVID MORVAN
ADAPTAÇÃO COM BASE NA OBRA
DE ROBERT E. HOWARD

ARTE DO INTERIOR
PIERRE ALARY

CORES
SEDYAS

LETRAS
DEZI SIENY

ARTE DA CAPA
JASON METCALF,
MIRKA ANDOLFO,
ED BENES,
PIERRE ALARY

EDITOR
RICH YOUNG & PATRICE LOUINET
AGRADECIMENTOS ESPECIAIS
ETIENNE BONNIN,
IVANKA HAHNENBERGER,
PATRICE LOUINET

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OLHE PARA ESTA ÁGUA. NUNCA VI
UMA TÃO ESCURA E PESADOSA.

NÃO VOU CORRER O
RISCO DE MERGULHAR
NELA.



ESTA CIDADE É ENORME. COMO ENCON-
TRAMOS O QUE VIEMOS PROCURAR?



ENTRE AS PESSOAS CIVILIZADAS, O PRINCIPAL
EDIFÍCIO SEMPRE SE DESTACA, DE MODO QUE
AS PESSOAS SE SINTAM SUFOCADAS PELO
PODER DAS AUTORIDADES.

E, UMA VEZ QUE SEJA CONCEBIDO COMO
SÍMBOLO DE SEU PODER, ELE TAMBÉM
CONTEM A MAIOR PARTE DE SUA FORTUNA.



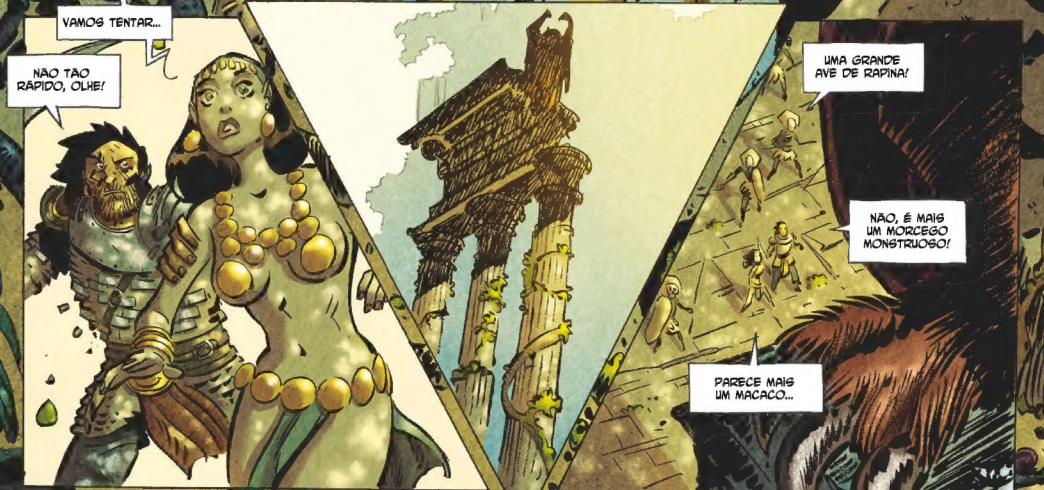
DEVE SER A PIRÂMIDE,
COROADA COM UMA COLUNA
REDONDA!

ELES SÃO TÃO
PREVISÍVEIS...

PARCE ALGUM TIPO DE
ALTAR, LOGO À FRENTE.

VAMOS TENTAR...

NÃO TÃO
RÁPIDO, OLHE!



UMA GRANDE
ÁVE DE RAPINA!

NÃO, É MAIS
UM MORCEGO
MONSTRUOSO!

PARCE MAIS
UM MACACO...



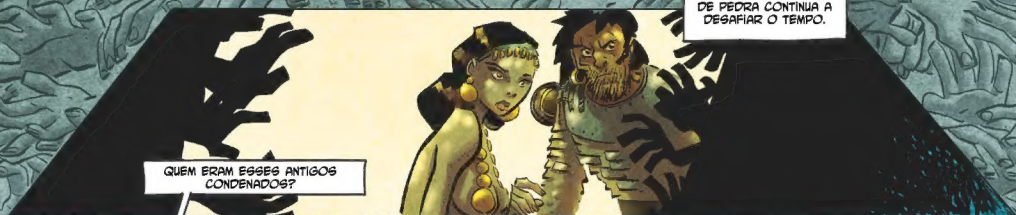


UM ALTAR DE
SACRIFÍCIOS.

E NÓS É QUE SOMOS BARBROS...

VOCÊ PODE VER OS CANAIS
ONDE O SANGUE FLUI DOS
LADOS DO ALTAR.

TODAS AS PAREDES
DESMORONARAM, MAS
ESTA INCRÍVEL PORTA
DE PEDRA CONTINUA A
DESAFIAR O TEMPO.

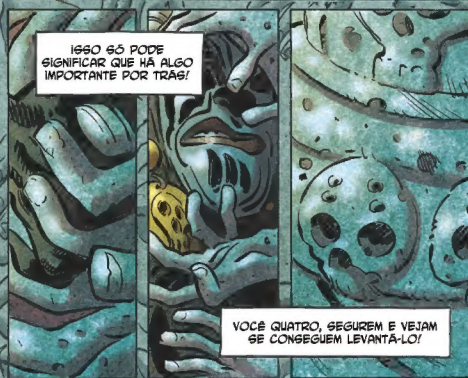


QUEM ERAM ESSES ANTIGOS
CONDENADOS?



MESMO AS LENDAS NÃO
MENCIONAM ESTA CIDADE.

VEJA TODAS ESSAS MÃOS ESCULPI-
DAS, PARECE QUE ELAS ESTÃO TEN-
TANDO REPELIR QUEM SE APROXIMA.



ISSO SÓ PODE
SIGNIFICAR QUE HÁ ALGO
IMPORTANTE POR TRÁS!

VOCÊ QUATRO, SEQUEM E VEJAM
SE CONSEGUEM LEVANTÁ-LO!



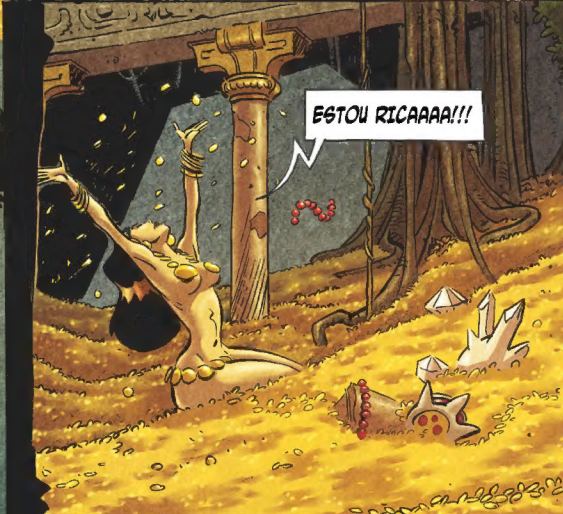
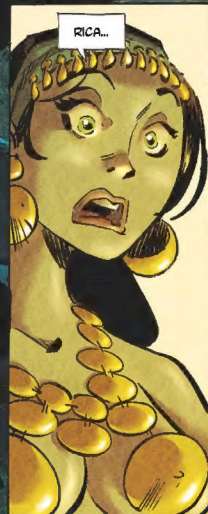
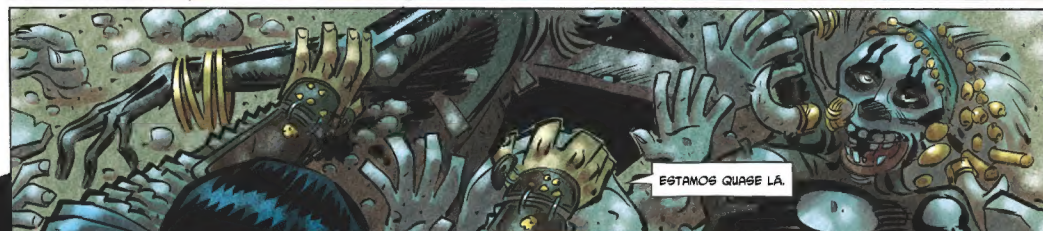
ESTÁ SE
MOVENDO!

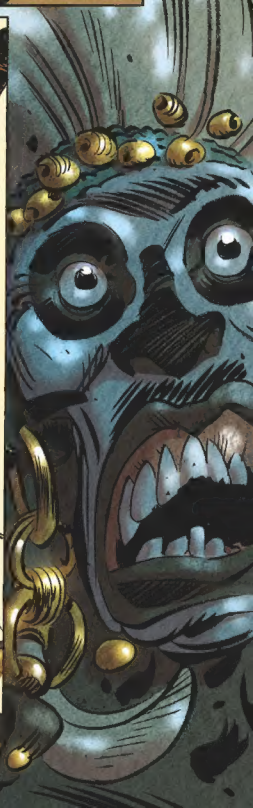
CLANG



PARA TRÁS,
CUIDADO!





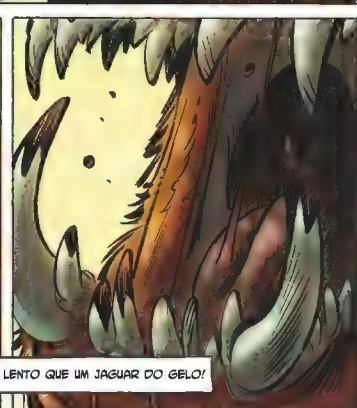


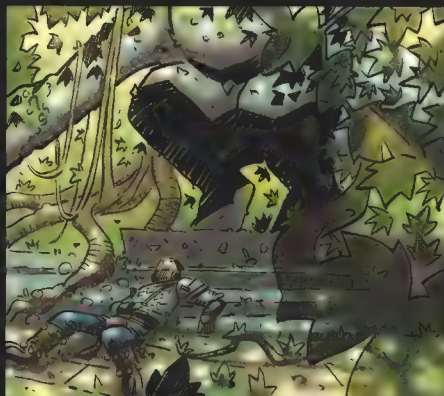


VOU LEVAR ALGUNS HOMENS PARA A FLORESTA E PROCURAR ÁGUA FRESCA.

FAÇA COMO VOCÊ QUISER.







O QUE...



FORMAS ALDAS, MONSTRUOSAS E DESBOTADAS... ESTOU FICANDO LOUÇO?

E COMO SE A CIDADE ESTIVESSE SE RECONSTRUINDO ACIMA DE MIM?

FOI HABITADA POR ENORMES SERES ALDOS!



MAS...



DEPOIS DE SÉCULOS DE PROSPERIDADE, ALGO TERRÍVEL ACONTECEU AQUI.



FOI UM TERREMOTO!

AS PAREDES E AS TORRES MAIS ALTAS DESABARAM.

O RIO FOI INFESTADO POR UMA SUBSTÂNCIA NEGRA E MORTAL, VOMITADA PELO ABISMO SUBTERRÂNEO.

UMA TERRÍVEL MUDANÇA QUÍMICA OCORREU NA ÁGUA.

MUITOS DAQUELES QUE BEBERAM MORRERAM. OS QUE SOBREVIVERAM SOFRERAM UMA MUDANÇA GRADUAL E TERRÍVEL.

POUCO A POUCO, ELES REVERTERAM A UM ESTADO PRIMITIVO.



GERAÇÃO APÓS GERAÇÃO, ELES
AFUNDARAM EM BESTIALIDADE,
TORNANDO-SE DÊMONIOS ALADOS.

O QUE RESTOU DO PRODÍGI-
OSO CONHECIMENTO DE SEUS
ANCESTRAIS FOI DISTORCIDO
E PERVERTIDO.

ELES HAVIAM CRESCIDO MAIS DO QUE A HUMANIDADE PODERIA SONHAR E
AFUNDARAM MAIS QUE OS PESADELOS MAIS INGANOS DO HOMEM.

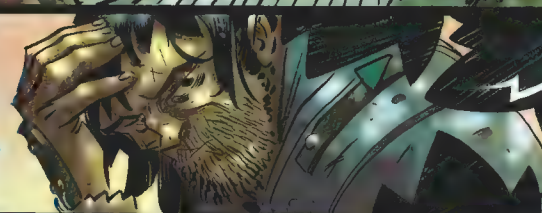


SUA RAÇA MORREU RAPIDAMENTE.



SOMENTE UMA
CRIATURA PERMANE-
CEU, ESPREITANDO
ENTRE AS RUINAS DE
SUA CIDADE COBER-
TA DE LIQUEN.

UMA PERVERSÃO
DA NATUREZA, ATRO-
FIADA, DEGENERADA
E REPUGNANTE.



HRM...

UM SONHO?

NÃO... A LOTUS NEGRA!



É POR ISSO QUE O MACACO
DÊMÔNIO NÃO VEIO PARA ACABAR
COMIGO.

SE EU NÃO DEIXAR ESTE LUGAR AGORA,
SEUS ESPÍRITOS VÃO ME MATAR, ACABA-
REI COMO O CONDENADO QUE BELIT
ENCONTROU.

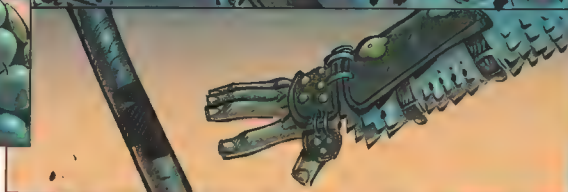
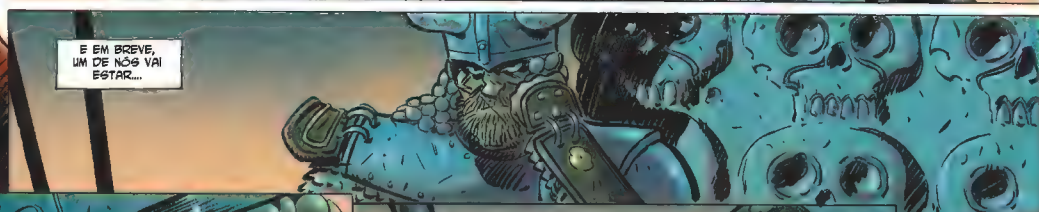
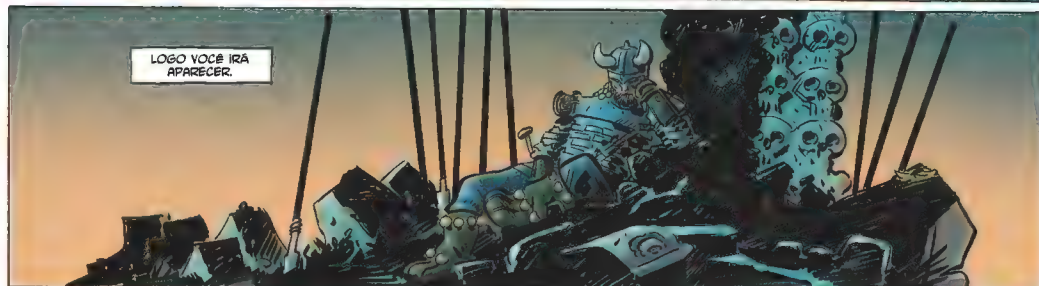
OS PIRATAS
MASSACRA-
DOS...

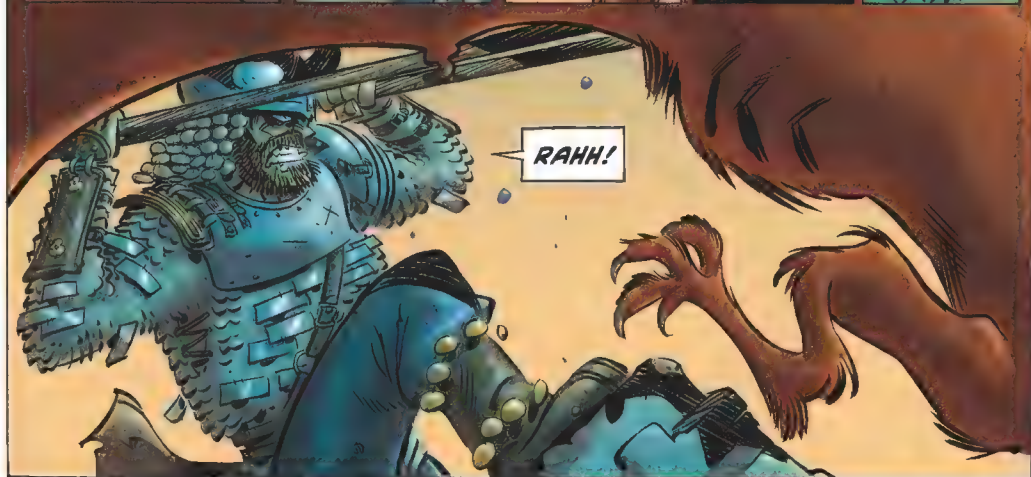
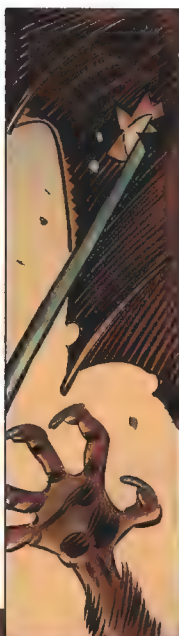
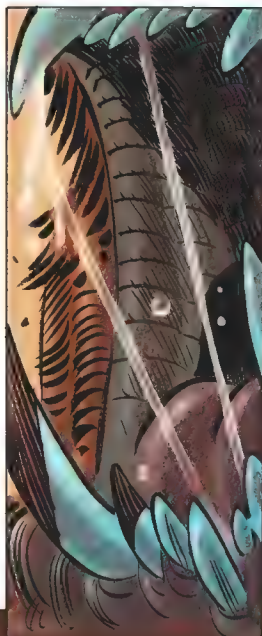
MAS ONDE
ESTÁ...

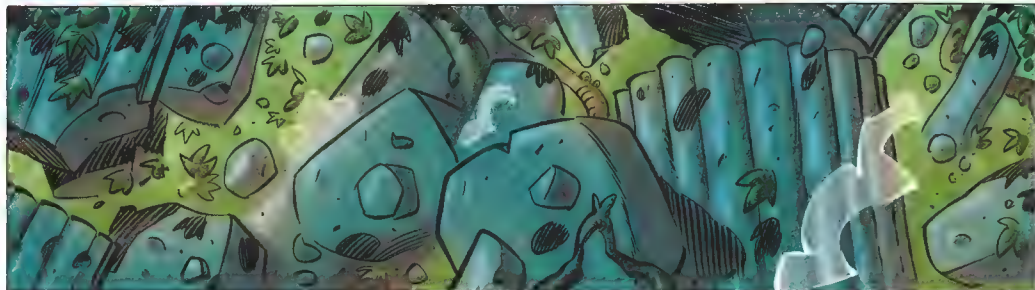
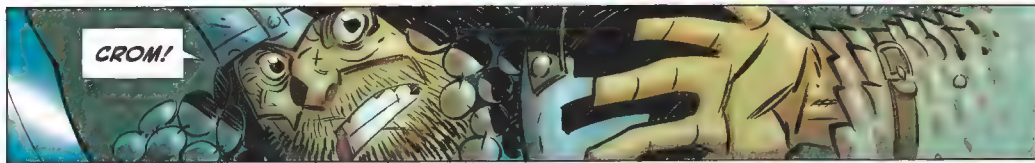
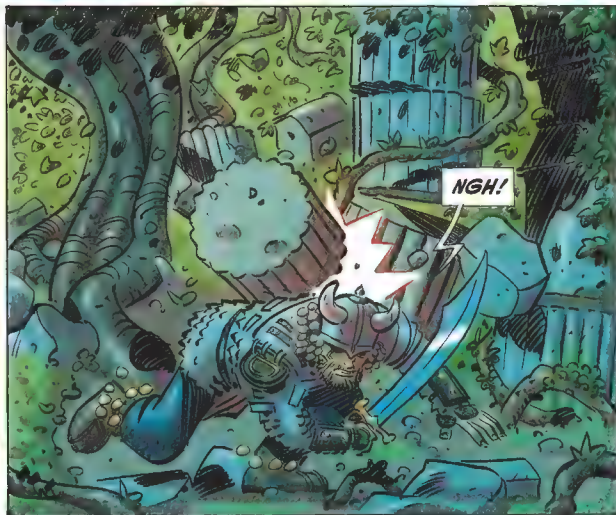
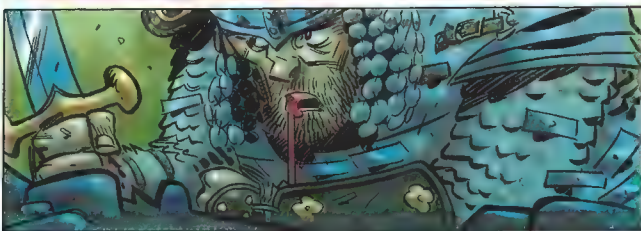
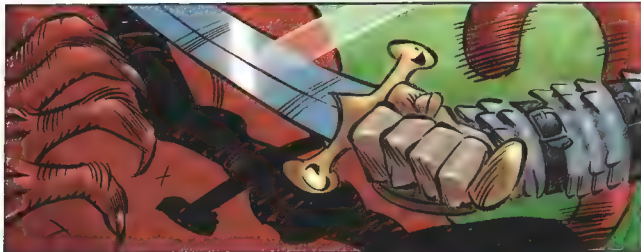


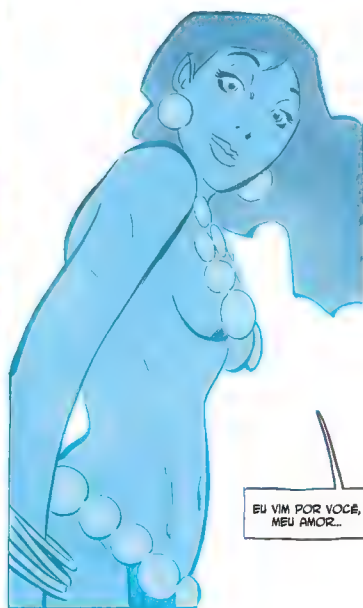
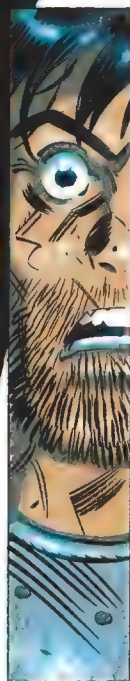
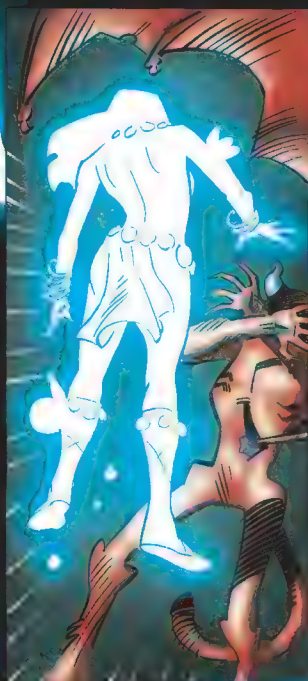
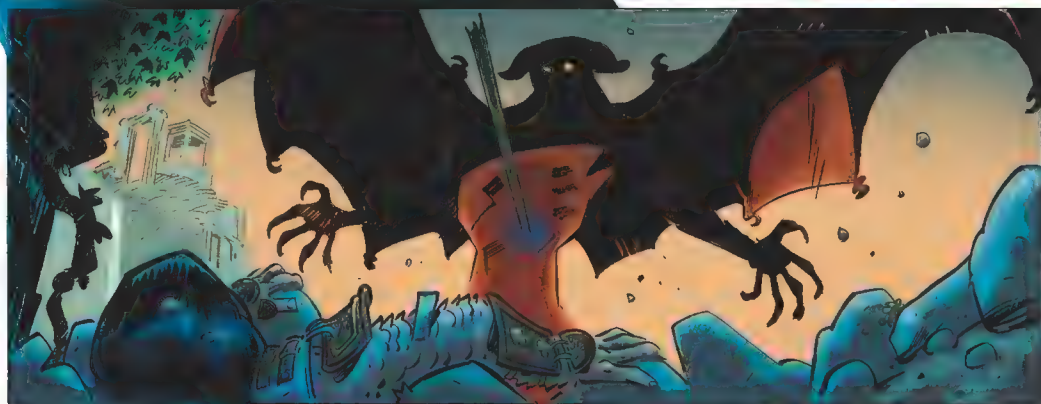
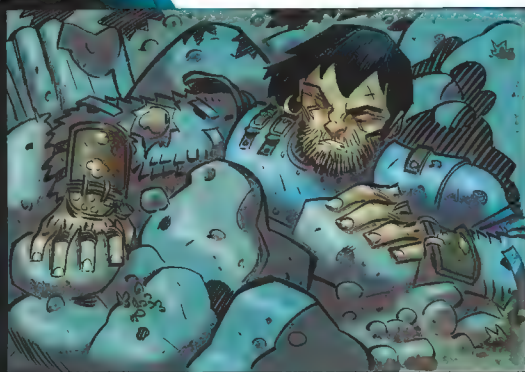
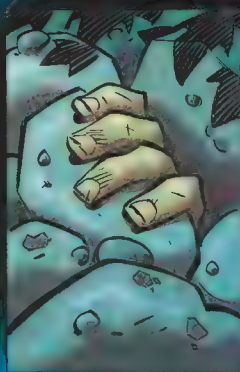
BELIT!

MEU AMOR...

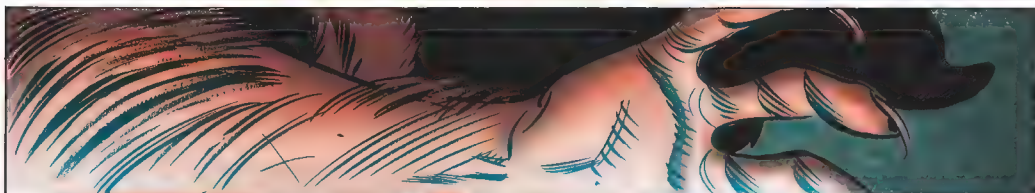
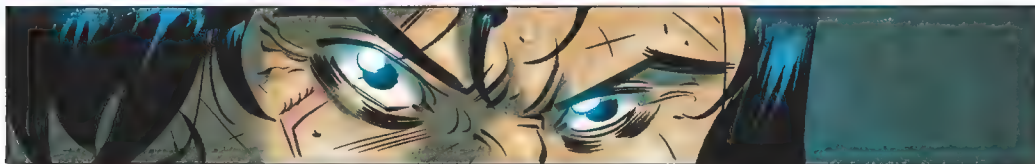
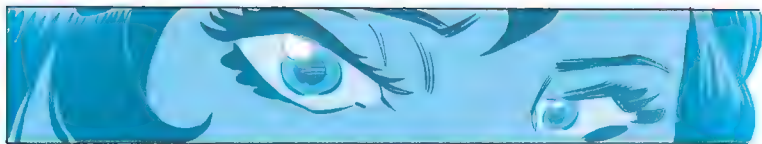






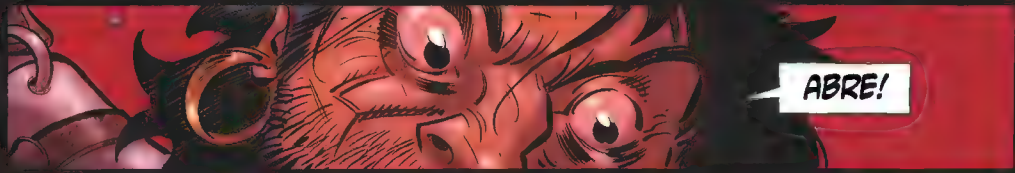


EU VIM POR VOCÊ,
MEU AMOR...

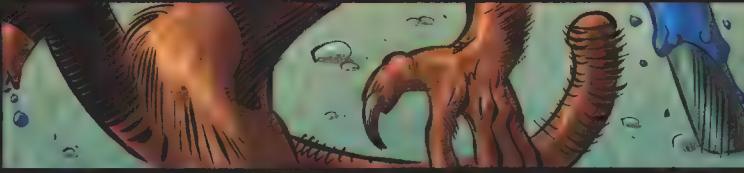




ABRE SUA
BOCA LARGA!



ABRE!



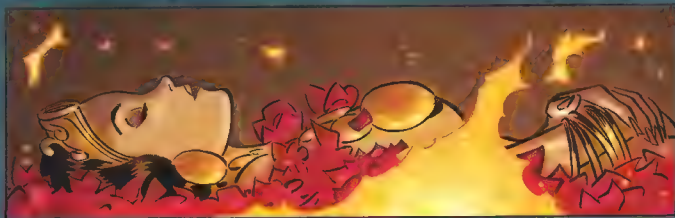
TUNK!!!



LOBO O AMANHECER IRA TINGIR O OCEANO.

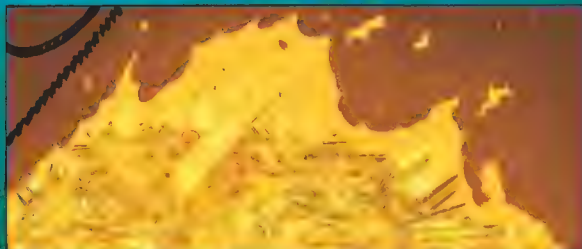


UM BRILHO AVERMELHADO IRA ILUMINAR A FOZ DO RIO.



UM PROFUNDO DESGOSTO ME ABALARA QUANDO OLHAR PARA AS ÁGUAS VERDES: NO HORIZONTE, ELAS SE TRANSFORMARAO EM MISTERIOSAS NÉVOAS ROXAS.

BELIT VEIO DO MAR. ELA LHE DERA ESPLENDOR E SEDUÇÃO.



SEM ELA, O OCEANO NÃO PASSARA DE UMA IMENSIDAO NUA, DESOLADA E SOMBRIA, DE UM POLO A OUTRO.

ELA PERTENCIA AO MAR, ENTÃO EU A MANDEI DE VOLTA PARA O SEU ETERNO MISTÉRIO.



NÃO HÁ MAIS NADA QUE EU POSSA FAZER.



ENTÃO, SE FOI A RAINHA DA COSTA NEGRA.

EU FICO PARADO E EM SILÊNCIO
ATÉ QUE O BRILHO VERMELHO
GURJA A DISTÂNCIA, DENTRO
DAS NEVOAS AZUIS...

...QUE LOGO VAI INUNDA
O OCEANO COM SEU RE-
PLEXO ROSA E DOURADO.

E ENTÃO...

...EU VOU VIVER COM
1960.

QUEEN OF THE BLACK COAST

By Robert E. Howard
May 1934 Weird Tales

PART TWO

She stepped back to make room for them, glancing up at the tower which loomed drunkenly above them. Three of the strongest blacks had gripped the handholes cut into the stone curiously unsuited to human hands— when Belit sprang back with a sharp cry. They froze in their places, and Conan, bending to aid them, wheeled with a startled curse.

“A snake in the grass,” she said, backing away. “Come and slay it; the rest of you bend your backs to the stone.”

Conan came quickly toward her, another taking his place. As he impatiently scanned the grass for the reptile, the giant blacks braced their feet, grunted and heaved with their huge muscles coiling and straining under their ebon skin. The altar did not come off the ground, but it revolved suddenly on its side. And simultaneously there was a grinding rumble above and the tower came crashing down, covering the four black men with broken masonry.

A cry of horror rose from their comrades. Belit’s slim fingers dug into Conan’s arm- muscles. “There was no serpent,” she whispered. “It was but a ruse to call you away. I feared; the old ones guarded their treasure well. Let us clear away the stones.”

With herculean labor they did so, and lifted out the mangled bodies of the four men. And under them, stained with their blood, the pirates found a crypt carved in the solid stone. The altar, hinged curiously with stone rods and sockets on one side, had served as its lid. And at first glance the crypt seemed brimming with liquid fire, catching the early light with a million blazing facets. Undreamable wealth lay before the eyes of the gaping pirates; diamonds, rubies, bloodstones, sapphires, turquoises, moonstones, opals, emeralds, amethysts, unknown gems that shone like the eyes of evil women. The crypt was filled to the brim with bright stones that the morning sun struck into lambent flame.

With a cry Wit dropped to her knees among the blood-stained rubble on the brink and thrust her white arms shoulder-deep into that pool of splendor. She withdrew them, clutching something that brought another cry to her lips—a long string of crimson stones that were like clots of frozen blood strung on a thick gold wire. In their glow the golden sunlight changed to bloody haze.

Belit’s eyes were like a woman’s in a trance. The Shemite soul finds a bright drunkenness in riches and material splendor, and the sight of this treasure might have shaken the soul of a sated emperor of Shushan.

“Take up the jewels, dogs!” her voice was shrill with her emotions.

“Look!” a muscular black arm stabbed toward the Tigress, and Belit wheeled, her crimson lips a-snarl, as if she expected to see a rival corsair sweeping in to despoil her of her plunder. But from the gunwales of the ship a dark shape rose, soaring away over the jungle.

“The devil-ape has been investigating the ship,” muttered the blacks uneasily.

“What matter?” cried Belit with a curse, raking back a rebellious lock with an impatient hand. “Make a litter of spears and mantles to bear these jewels—where the devil are you going?”

“To look to the galley,” grunted Conan. “That bat-thing might have knocked a hole in the bottom, for all we know.”

He ran swiftly down the cracked wharf and sprang aboard. A moment’s swift examination below decks, and he swore heartily, casting a clouded glance in the direction the bat-being had vanished. He returned hastily to Belit, superintending the plundering of the crypt. She had looped the necklace about her neck, and on her naked white bosom the red clots glimmered darkly. A huge naked black stood crotch- deep in the jewel-brimming crypt, scooping up great handfuls of splendor to

pass them to eager hands above. Strings of frozen iridescence hung between his dusky fingers; drops of red fire dripped from his hands, piled high with starlight and rainbow. It was as if a black titan stood straddle- legged in the bright pits of hell, his lifted hands full of stars.

“That flying devil has staved in the water-casks,” said Conan. “If we hadn’t been so dazed by these stones we’d have heard the noise. We were fools not to have left a man on guard. We can’t drink this river water. I’ll take twenty men and search for fresh water in the jungle.”

She looked at him vaguely, in her eyes the blank blaze of her strange passion, her fingers working at the gems on her breast.

“Very well,” she said absently, hardly heeding him. “I’ll get the loot aboard.”

The jungle closed quickly about them, changing the light from gold to gray. From the arching green branches creepers dangled like pythons. The warriors fell into single file, creeping through the primordial twilights like black phantoms following a white ghost.

Underbrush was not so thick as Conan had anticipated. The ground was spongy but not slushy. Away from the river, it sloped gradually upward. Deeper and deeper they plunged into the green waving depths, and still there was no sign of water, either running stream or stagnant pool. Conan halted suddenly, his warriors freezing into basaltic statues. In the tense silence that followed, the Cimmerian shook his head irritably.

“Go ahead,” he grunted to a sub-chief, N’Gora. “March straight on until you can no longer see me; then stop and wait for me. I believe we’re being followed. I heard something.”

The blacks shuffled their feet uneasily, but did as they were told. As they swung onward, Conan stepped quickly behind a great tree, glaring back along the way they had come.

From that leafy fastness anything might emerge. Nothing occurred; the faint sounds of the marching spearmen faded in the distance. Conan suddenly realized that the air was impregnated with an alien and exotic scent. Something gently brushed his temple. He turned quickly. From a cluster of green, curiously leafed stalks, great black blossoms nodded at him. One of these had touched him. They seemed to beckon him, to arch their pliant stems toward him. They spread and rustled, though no wind blew.

He recoiled, recognizing the black lotus, whose juice was death, and whose scent brought dream-haunted slumber. But already he felt a subtle lethargy stealing over him. He sought to lift his sword, to hew down the serpentine stalks, but his arm hung lifeless at his side. He opened his mouth to shout to his warriors, but only a faint rattle issued. The next instant, with appalling suddenness, the jungle waved and dimmed out before his eyes; he did not hear the screams that burst out awfully not far away, as his knees collapsed, letting him pitch limply to the earth. Above his prostrate form the great black blossoms nodded in the windless air.

3. THE HORROR IN THE JUNGLE

*Was it a dream the nighted lotus brought?
Then curst the dream that bought my sluggish life;
And curst each laggard hour that does not see
Hot blood drip blackly from the crimsoned knife.
The Song of Belit*

First there was the blackness of an utter void, with the cold winds of cosmic space blowing through it. Then shapes, vague, monstrous and evanescent, rolled in dim panorama through the expanse of nothingness, as if the darkness were taking material form. The winds blew and a vortex formed, a whirling pyramid of roaring blackness. From it grew Shape and Dimension; then suddenly, like clouds dispersing, the darkness rolled away on either hand and a huge city of dark green stone rose on the bank of a wide river, flowing through an illimitable plain. Through this city moved beings of alien configuration.

Cast in the mold of humanity, they were distinctly not men. They were winged and of heroic proportions; not a branch on the mysterious stalk of evolution that culminated in man, but the ripe blossom on an alien tree, separate and apart from that stalk. Aside from their wings, in physical appearance they resembled man only as man in his highest form resembles the great apes. In spiritual, esthetic and intellectual development they were superior to man as man is superior to the gorilla. But when they reared their colossal city, man's primal ancestors had not yet risen from the slime of the primordial seas.

These beings were mortal, as are all things built of flesh and blood. They lived, loved and died, though the individual span of life was enormous. Then, after uncounted millions of years, the Change began. The vista shimmered and wavered, like a picture thrown on a windblown curtain. Over the city and the land the ages flowed as waves flow over a beach, and each wave brought alterations. Somewhere on the planet the magnetic centers were shifting; the great glaciers and ice-fields were withdrawing toward the new poles.

The littoral of the great river altered. Plains turned into swamps that stank with reptilian life. Where fertile meadows had rolled, forests reared up, growing into dank jungles. The changing ages wrought on the inhabitants of the city as well. They did not migrate to fresher lands. Reasons inexplicable to humanity held them to the ancient city and their doom. And as that once rich and mighty land sank deeper and deeper into the black mire of the sunless jungle, so into the chaos of squalling jungle life sank the people of the city. Terrific convulsions shook the earth; the nights were lurid with spouting volcanoes that fringed the dark horizons with red pillars.

After an earthquake that shook down the outer walls and highest towers of the city, and caused the river to run black for days with some lethal substance spewed up from the subterranean depths, a frightful chemical change became apparent in the waters the folk had drunk for millenniums uncountable.

Many died who drank of it; and in those who lived, the drinking wrought change, subtle, gradual and grisly. In adapting themselves to the changing conditions, they had sunk far below their original level. But the lethal waters altered them even more horribly, from generation to more bestial generation. They who had been winged gods became pinioned demons, with all that remained of their ancestors' vast knowledge distorted and perverted and twisted into ghastly paths. As they had risen higher than mankind might dream, so they sank lower than man's maddest nightmares reach. They died fast, by cannibalism, and horrible feuds fought out in the murk of the midnight jungle. And at last among the lichen-grown ruins of their city only a single shape lurked, a stunted abhorrent perversion of nature.

Then for the first time humans appeared: dark-skinned, hawkfaced men in copper and leather harness, bearing bows—the warriors of pre-historic Stygia. There were only fifty of them, and they were haggard and gaunt with starvation and prolonged effort, stained and scratched with jungle-wandering, with bloodcrusted bandages that told of fierce fighting. In their minds was a tale of warfare and defeat, and flight before a stronger tribe which drove them ever southward, until they lost themselves in the green ocean of jungle and river.

Exhausted they lay down among the ruins where red blossoms that bloom but once in a century waved in the full moon, and sleep fell upon them. And as they slept, a hideous shape crept red-eyed from the shadows and performed weird and awful rites about and above each sleeper. The moon hung in the shadowy sky, painting the jungle red and black; above the sleepers glimmered the crimson blossoms, like splashes of blood. Then the moon went down and the eyes of the necromancer were red jewels set in the ebony of night.

When dawn spread its white veil over the river, there were no men to be seen: only a hairy winged horror that squatted in the center of a ring of fifty great spotted hyenas that pointed quivering muzzles to the ghastly sky and howled like souls in hell.

Then scene followed scene so swiftly that each tripped over the heels of its predecessor. There was a confusion of move-

ment, a writhing and melting of lights and shadows, against a background of black jungle, green stone ruins and murky river. Black men came up the river in long boats with skulls grinning on the prows, or stole stooping through the trees, spear in hand. They fled screaming through the dark from red eyes and slavering fangs. Howls of dying men shook the shadows; stealthy feet padded through the gloom, vampire eyes blazed redly. There were grisly feasts beneath the moon, across whose red disk a batlike shadow incessantly swept.

Then abruptly, etched clearly in contrast to these impressionistic glimpses, around the jungled point in the whitening dawn swept a long galley, thronged with shining ebon figures, and in the bows stood a white-skinned ghost in blue steel.

It was at this point that Conan first realized that he was dreaming. Until that instant he had had no consciousness of individual existence. But as he saw himself treading the boards of the Tigress, he recognized both the existence and the dream, although he did not awaken.

Even as he wondered, the scene shifted abruptly to a jungle glade where N'Gora and nineteen black spearmen stood, as if awaiting someone. Even as he realized that it was he for whom they waited, a horror swooped down from the skies and their stolidity was broken by yells of fear. Like men maddened by terror, they threw away their weapons and raced wildly through the jungle, pressed close by the slavering monstrosity that flapped its wings above them.

Chaos and confusion followed this vision, during which Conan feebly struggled to awake. Dimly he seemed to see himself lying under a nodding cluster of black blossoms, while from the bushes a hideous shape crept toward him. With a savage effort he broke the unseen bonds which held him to his dreams, and started upright.

Bewilderment was in the glare he cast about him. Near him swayed the dusky lotus, and he hastened to draw away from it.

In the spongy soil near by there was a track as if an animal had put out a foot, preparatory to emerging from the bushes, then had withdrawn it. It looked like the spoor of an unbelievably large hyena.

He yelled for N'Gora. Primordial silence brooded over the jungle, in which his yells sounded brittle and hollow as mockery. He could not see the sun, but his wilderness-trained instinct told him the day was near its end. A panic rose in him at the thought that he had lain senseless for hours. He hastily followed the tracks of the spearmen, which lay plain in the damp loam before him. They ran in single file, and he soon emerged into a glade—to stop short, the skin crawling between his shoulders as he recognized it as the glade he had seen in his lotus-drugged dream. Shields and spears lay scattered about as if dropped in headlong flight.

And from the tracks which led out of the glade and deeper into the fastnesses, Conan knew that the spearmen had fled, wildly. The footprints overlay one another; they weaved blindly among the trees. And with startling suddenness the hastening Cimmerian came out of the jungle onto a hill-like rock which sloped steeply, to break off abruptly in a sheer precipice forty feet high. And something crouched on the brink.

At first Conan thought it to be a great black gorilla. Then he saw that it was a giant black man that crouched ape-like, long arms dangling, froth dripping from the loose lips. It was not until, with a sobbing cry, the creature lifted huge hands and rushed towards him, that Conan recognized N'Gora. The black man gave no heed to Conan's shout as he charged, eyes rolled up to display the whites, teeth gleaming, face an inhuman mask.

With his skin crawling with the horror that madness always instils in the sane, Conan passed his sword through the black man's body; then, avoiding the hooked hands that clawed at him as N'Gora sank down, he strode to the edge of the cliff.

For an instant he stood looking down into the jagged rocks below, where lay N'Gora's spearmen, in limp, distorted attitudes that told of crushed limbs and splintered bones. Not one moved. A cloud of huge black flies buzzed loudly above

the bloods-plashed stones; the ants had already begun to gnaw at the corpses. On the trees about sat birds of prey, and a jackal, looking up and seeing the man on the cliff, slunk furtively away.

For a little space Conan stood motionless. Then he wheeled and ran back the way he had come, flinging himself with reckless haste through the tall grass and bushes, hurdling creepers that sprawled snake-like across his path. His sword swung low in his right hand, and an unaccustomed pallor tinged his dark face.

The silence that reigned in the jungle was not broken. The sun had set and great shadows rushed upward from the slime of the black earth. Through the gigantic shades of lurking death and grim desolation Conan was a speeding glimmer of scarlet and blue steel. No sound in all the solitude was heard except his own quick panting as he burst from the shadows into the dim twilight of the river-shore.

He saw the galley shouldering the rotten wharf, the ruins reeling drunkenly in the gray half-light.

And here and there among the stones were spots of raw bright color, as if a careless hand had splashed with a crimson brush.

Again Conan looked on death and destruction. Before him lay his spearmen, nor did they rise to salute him. From the jungle edge to the riverbank, among the rotting pillars and along the broken piers they lay, torn and mangled and half devoured, chewed travesties of men.

All about the bodies and pieces of bodies were swarms of huge footprints, like those of hyenas.

Conan came silently upon the pier, approaching the galley above whose deck was suspended something that glimmered ivory-white in the faint twilight. Speechless, the Cimmerian looked on the Queen of the Black Coast as she hung from the yard-arm of her own galley. Between the yard and her white throat stretched a line of crimson clots that shone like blood in the gray light.

4. THE ATTACK FROM THE AIR

The shadows were black around him,

The dripping jaws gaped wide,

Thicker than rain the red drops fell;

But my love was fiercer than Death's black spell,

Nor all the iron walls of hell

Could keep me from his side.

The Song of Belit

The jungle was a black colossus that locked the ruin-littered glade in ebon arms. The moon had not risen; the stars were flecks of hot amber in a breathless sky that reeked of death. On the pyramid among the fallen towers sat Conan the Cimmerian like an iron statue, chin propped on massive fists. Out in the black shadows stealthy feet padded and red eyes glimmered. The dead lay as they had fallen. But on the deck of the Tigress, on a pyre of broken benches, spear-shafts and leopardskins, lay the Queen of the Black Coast in her last sleep, wrapped in Conan's scarlet cloak. Like a true queen she lay, with her plunder heaped high about her: silks, cloth-of-gold, silver braid, casks of gems and golden coins, silver ingots, jeweled daggers and teocallis of gold wedges.

But of the plunder of the accursed city, only the sullen waters of Zarkheba could tell where Conan had thrown it with a heathen curse. Now he sat grimly on the pyramid, waiting for his unseen foes. The black fury in his soul drove out all fear. What shapes would emerge from the blackness he knew not, nor did he care.

He no longer doubted the visions of the black lotus. He understood that while waiting for him in the glade, N'Gora and his comrades had been terror-stricken by the winged monster swooping upon them from the sky, and fleeing in blind panic, had fallen over the cliff, all except their chief, who had somehow escaped their fate, though not madness.

Meanwhile, or immediately after, or perhaps before, the de-

struction of those on the riverbank had been accomplished. Conan did not doubt that the slaughter along the river had been massacre rather than battle. Already unmanned by their superstitious fears, the blacks might well have died without striking a blow in their own defense when attacked by their inhuman foes.

Why he had been spared so long, he did not understand, unless the malign entity which ruled the river meant to keep him alive to torture him with grief and fear. All pointed to a human or superhuman intelligence—the breaking of the watercasks to divide the forces, the driving of the blacks over the cliff, and last and greatest, the grim jest of the crimson necklace knotted like a hangman's noose about Belit's white neck.

Having apparently saved the Cimmerian for the choicest victim, and extracted the last ounce of exquisite mental torture, it was likely that the unknown enemy would conclude the drama by sending him after the other victims. No smile bent Conan's grim lips at the thought, but his eyes were lit with iron laughter.

The moon rose, striking fire from the Cimmerian's horned helmet. No call awoke the echoes; yet suddenly the night grew tense and the jungle held its breath. Instinctively Conan loosened the great sword in its sheath. The pyramid on which he rested was four-sided, one—the side toward the jungle carved in broad steps. In his hand was a Shemite bow, such as Belit had taught her pirates to use. A heap of arrows lay at his feet, feathered ends towards him, as he rested on one knee.

Something moved in the blackness under the trees. Etched abruptly in the rising moon, Conan saw a darkly blocked-out head and shoulders, brutish in outline. And now from the shadows dark shapes came silently, swiftly, running low—twenty great spotted hyenas. Their slavering fangs flashed in the moonlight, their eyes blazed as no true beast's eyes ever blazed.

Twenty: then the spears of the pirates had taken toll of the pack, after all. Even as he thought this, Conan drew nock to ear, and at the twang of the string a flame-eyed shadow bounded high and fell writhing. The rest did not falter; on they came, and like a rain of death among them fell the arrows of the Cimmerian, driven with all the force and accuracy of steely thews backed by a hate hot as the slag-heaps of hell.

In his berserk fury he did not miss; the air was filled with feathered destruction. The havoc wrought among the onrushing pack was breathtaking. Less than half of them reached the foot of the pyramid. Others dropped upon the broad steps. Glaring down into the blazing eyes, Conan knew these creatures were not beasts; it was not merely in their unnatural size that he sensed a blasphemous difference. They exuded an aura tangible as the black mist rising from a corpse-littered swamp. By what godless alchemy these beings had been brought into existence, he could not guess; but he knew he faced diabolism blacker than the Well of Skelos.

Springing to his feet, he bent his bow powerfully and drove his last shaft point blank at a great hairy shape that soared up at his throat. The arrow was a flying beam of moonlight that flashed onward with but a blur in its course, but the were-beast plunged convulsively in midair and crashed headlong, shot through and through.

Then the rest were on him, in a nightmare rush of blazing eyes and dripping fangs. His fiercely driven sword shore the first asunder; then the desperate impact of the others bore him down. He crushed a narrow skull with the pommel of his hilt, feeling the bone splinter and blood and brains gush over his hand; then, dropping the sword, useless at such deadly close quarters, he caught at the throats of the two horrors which were ripping and tearing at him in silent fury. A foul acrid scent almost stifled him, his own sweat blinded him. Only his mail saved him from being ripped to ribbons in an instant. The next, his naked right hand locked on a hairy throat and tore it open. His left hand, missing the throat of the other beast, caught and broke its foreleg. A short yelp, the only cry in that grim battle, and hideously human-like, burst from the maimed beast.

At the sick horror of that cry from a bestial throat, Conan involuntarily relaxed his grip. One, blood gushing from its torn jugular, lunged at him in a last spasm of ferocity, and fastened its fangs on his throat—to fall back dead, even as Conan felt the tearing agony of its grip.

The other, springing forward on three legs, was slashing at his belly as a wolf slashes, actually rending the links of his mail. Flinging aside the dying beast, Conan grappled the crippled horror and, with a muscular effort that brought a groan from his blood-flecked lips, he heaved upright, gripping the struggling, bearing fiend in his arms. An instant he reeled off balance, its fetid breath hot on his nostrils; its jaws snapping at his neck; then he hurled it from him, to crash with bone-splintering force down the marble steps.

As he reeled on wide-braced legs, sobbing for breath, the jungle and the moon swimming bloodily to his sight, the thrash of bat-wings was loud in his ears. Stooping, he groped for his sword, and swaying upright, braced his feet drunkenly and heaved the great blade above his head with both hands, shaking the blood from his eyes as he sought the air above him for his foe.

Instead of attack from the air, the pyramid staggered suddenly and awfully beneath his feet. He heard a rumbling crackle and saw the tall column above him wave like a wand. Stung to galvanized life, he bounded far out; his feet hit a step, halfway down, which rocked beneath him, and his next desperate leap carried him clear. But even as his heels hit the earth, with a shattering crash like a breaking mountain the pyramid crumpled, the column came thundering down in bursting fragments. For a blind cataclysmic instant the sky seemed to rain shards of marble. Then a rubble of shattered stone lay whitely under the moon.

Conan stirred, throwing off the splinters that half covered him. A glancing blow had knocked off his helmet and momentarily stunned him. Across his legs lay a great piece of the column, pinning him down. He was not sure that his legs were unbroken. His black locks were plastered with sweat; blood trickled from the wounds in his throat and hands. He hitched up on one arm, struggling with the debris that prisoned him.

Then something swept down across the stars and struck the sword near him. Twisting about, he saw it—the winged one!

With fearful speed it was rushing upon him, and in that instant Conan had only a confused impression of a gigantic manlike shape hurtling along on bowed and stunted legs; of huge hairy arms outstretching misshapen black-nailed paws; of a malformed head, in whose broad face the only features recognizable as such were a pair of blood-red eyes. It was a thing neither man, beast, nor devil, imbued with characteristics subhuman as well as characteristics superhuman.

But Conan had no time for conscious consecutive thought. He threw himself toward his fallen sword, and his clawing fingers missed it by inches. Desperately he grasped the shard which pinned his legs, and the veins swelled in his temples as he strove to thrust it off him. It gave slowly, but he knew that before he could free himself the monster would be upon him, and he knew that those black-taloned hands were death.

The headlong rush of the winged one had not wavered. It towered over the prostrate Cimmerian like a black shadow, arms thrown wide—a glimmer of white flashed between it and its victim.

In one mad instant she was there—a tense white shape, vibrant with love fierce as a she-panther's. The dazed Cimmerian saw between him and the onrushing death, her lithe figure, shimmering like ivory beneath the moon; he saw the blaze of her dark eyes, the thick cluster of her burnished hair; her bosom heaved, her red lips were parted, she cried out sharp and ringing at the ring of steel as she thrust at the winged monster's breast.

"Belit!" screamed Conan. She flashed a quick glance at him, and in her dark eyes he saw her love flaming, a naked elemental thing of raw fire and molten lava. Then she was gone, and the Cimmerian saw only the winged fiend which had staggered back in unwonted fear, arms lifted as if to fend off attack. And

he knew that Belit in truth lay on her pyre on the Tigress's deck. In his ears rang her passionate cry: "Were I still in death and you fighting for life I would come back from the abyss—"

With a terrible cry he heaved upward hurling the stone aside. The winged one came on again, and Conan sprang to meet it, his veins on fire with madness. The thews started out like cords on his forearms as he swung his great sword, pivoting on his heel with the force of the sweeping arc. Just above the hips it caught the hurtling shape, and the knotted legs fell one way, the torso another as the blade sheared clear through its hairy body.

Conan stood in the moonlit silence, the dripping sword sagging in his hand, staring down at the remnants of his enemy. The red eyes glared up at him with awful life, then glazed and set; the great hands knotted spasmodically and stiffened. And the oldest race in the world was extinct.

Conan lifted his head, mechanically searching for the beast-things that had been its slaves and executioners. None met his gaze. The bodies he saw littering the moon-splashed grass were of men, not beasts: hawk-faced, dark skinned men, naked, transfixed by arrows or mangled by sword-strokes. And they were crumbling into dust before his eyes.

Why had not the winged master come to the aid of its slaves when he struggled with them? Had it feared to come within reach of fangs that might turn and rend it? Craft and caution had lurked in that misshapen skull, but had not availed in the end.

Turning on his heel, the Cimmerian strode down the rotting wharfs and stepped aboard the galley. A few strokes of his sword cut her adrift, and he went to the sweep-head. The Tigress rocked slowly in the sullen water, sliding out sluggishly toward the middle of the river, until the broad current caught her. Conan leaned on the sweep, his somber gaze fixed on the cloak-wrapped shape that lay in state on the pyre the richness of which was equal to the ransom of an empress.

5. THE FUNERAL PYRE

*Now we are done with roaming, evermore;
No more the oars, the windy harp's refrain;
Nor crimson pennon frights the dusky shore;
Blue girdle of the world, receive again
Her whom thou gavest me.
The Song of Belit*

Again dawn tinged the ocean. A redder glow lit the river-mouth. Conan of Cimmeria leaned on his great sword upon the white beach, watching the Tigress swinging out on her last voyage. There was no light in his eyes that contemplated the glassy swells. Out of the rolling blue wastes all glory and wonder had gone. A fierce revulsion shook him as he gazed at the green surges that deepened into purple hazes of mystery.

Belit had been of the sea; she had lent it splendor and allure. Without her it rolled a barren, dreary and desolate waste from pole to pole. She belonged to the sea; to its everlasting mystery he returned her. He could do no more. For himself, its glittering blue splendor was more repellent than the leafy fronds which rustled and whispered behind him of vast mysterious wilds beyond them, and into which he must plunge.

No hand was at the sweep of the Tigress, no oars drove her through the green water. But a clean tanging wind bellied her silken sail, and as a wild swan cleaves the sky to her nest, she sped seaward, flames mounting higher and higher from her deck to lick at the mast and envelop the figure that lay lapped in scarlet on the shining pyre.

So passed the Queen of the Black Coast, and leaning on his red-stained sword, Conan stood silently until the red glow had faded far out in the blue hazes and dawn splashed its rose and gold over the ocean.

THE END

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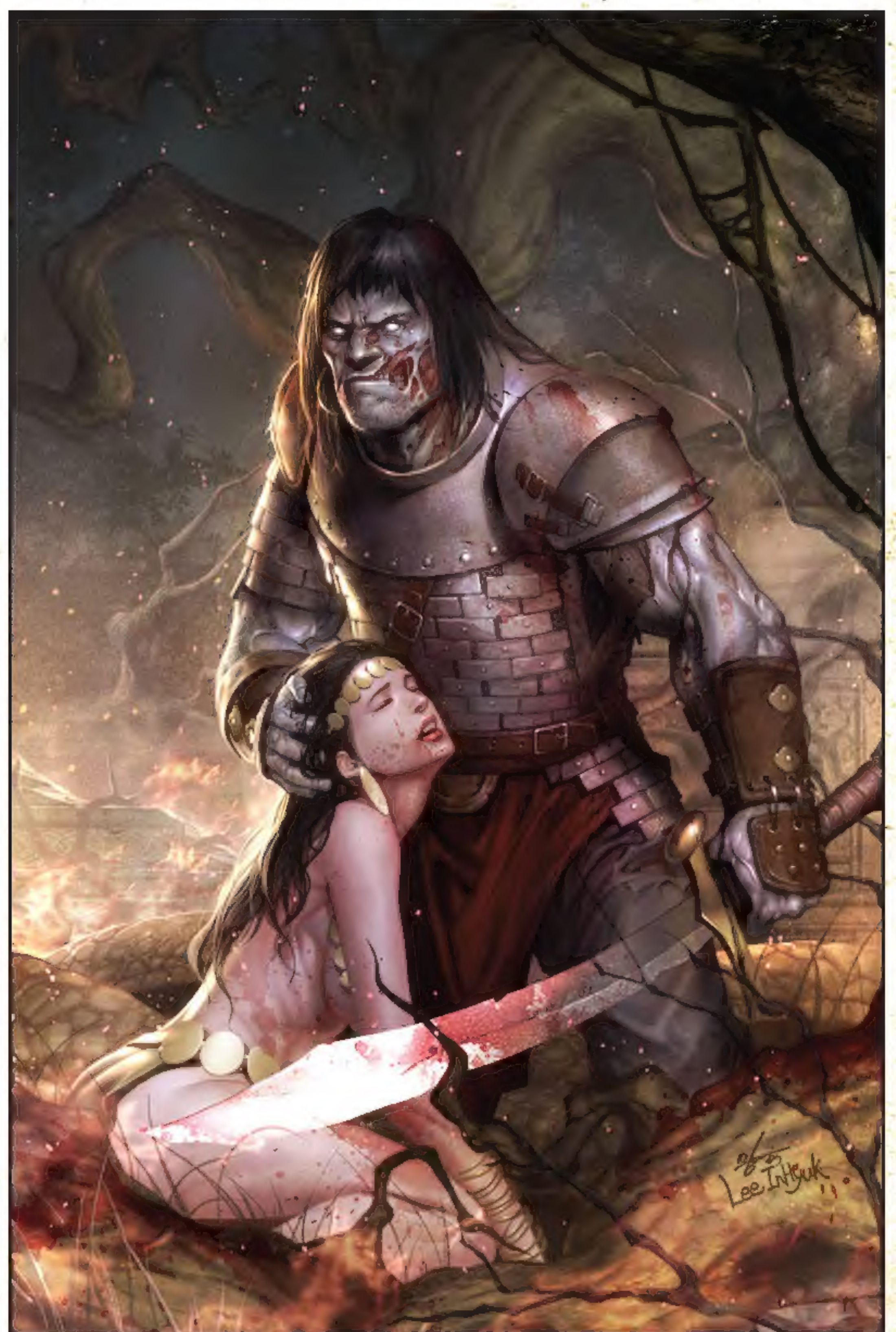
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